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## Commentary

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# COP 15 and Pacific Island states: A collective voice on climate change

### ABSTRACT

Pacific Island states battled to have their perspectives taken into account at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. Though widely accepted as being among the first victims of climate change, most developed countries, along with some emerging economies, put their own geopolitical interests ahead of what Pacific leaders argued was their right to survival as viable nations and cultures. The Pacific Island states negotiated collectively for shared goals, with Tuvalu often taking a leadership role. Australia and New Zealand, meanwhile, pursued strategies at marked odds with their smaller neighbours. Papua New Guinea broke ranks with other island nations, concentrating overwhelmingly on forestry negotiations to the exclusion of other common objectives. The PNG delegation also pushed to weaken the safeguarding of indigenous rights in the draft text on forestry. Much of the civil society present in Copenhagen, however, gave vocal support for the position taken by the Pacific Island states. This article is based largely on interviews with delegates and commentators at COP 15 in December 2009.

YASMINE RYAN

*Independent journalist, Paris*

**T**HE TERRAIN confronted by the Pacific Island states at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, 7-18 December 2009, was by no means simple to navigate. Good faith and hope for a successful outcome was tempered by the reality of the United State's inability to pass domestic legislation on climate change in time to bring anything

concrete to the negotiating table, a factor that left other industrialised and emerging economies reluctant to make firm commitments of their own.

Yet many of the most vulnerable developing countries resisted calls ahead of the conference by the Danish government to lower expectations. The Pacific Island states, widely acknowledged to be on the front line of climate change, were among those who continued to aspire to a 'fair, ambitious and legally-binding agreement'. While none of the developed world leaders chose to play superman and save the day at the last hour, Tuvalu did take on the helm of outspoken advocate for those unwilling to accept anything less.

### **What Pacific Island states wanted from Copenhagen**

Solidarity between most South Pacific nations was firm, despite strong opposition from New Zealand and Australia. For their delegations, the emission cuts needed to ensure their survival was top priority. Pacific delegates gave regular joint press conferences under the banner 'The Pacific Voice: 1.5 to Stay Alive.' They negotiated predominately as members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Objectives were shared with the Least Developed Countries bloc, which counts the Pacific nations of Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu as members. The weighty Group of 77 was also a close ally on many key objectives, as were many Latin American countries. The goals of the BASIC countries—China, India, Brazil and South Africa—often came into conflict with those of economically weaker countries.

The agenda pursued by the Pacific Island states and their allies was a radical one: economic redistribution on a global level and calls for global green houses (GHG) to be seriously curbed. They argued that GHG emissions must not go beyond 350 parts per million, with the global temperature increase capped at 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. This bottom line was adopted by AOSIS to ensure the survival of its low-lying members. The figure is based on research commissioned by AOSIS from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and on information from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). From their perspective, even this target is a compromise: at 1.5° C, there are still chances of disastrous sea level rise for low-lying islands.

Many other developing countries, especially those in tropical regions, would also suffer disproportionately from any increase. The IPCC has

warned, for instance, that the African continent will warm around 1.5 times the global average temperature increase, thus condemning those countries to widespread drought and disease. The position also struck a chord with civil society groups and protestors lobbying for a radically ambitious agreement, including AVAAZ, TckTckTck and 350.org. This approach was dismissed by some of the industrialised countries as politically naïve. In contrast, developed countries including New Zealand and Australia lobbied in support of the cap-and-trade model, ‘offsetting’ GHG emissions by trading in credits on an international market. Most delegates from Pacific Island states argued that such an approach is simply a cover for inaction.

For some, they call it an investment, or a disposable commodity. Some are talking about saving the planet for future generations. But what about us? (Elisaia, press conference, 2009)

The concept of a climate debt has gained ground amongst developing countries who argue for an international climate regime based on reparations from historic polluters paid to the poorest countries on the front lines of climate change. Most industrialised countries support a market-based development model, similar to the one established under the Kyoto Protocol and administered by the World Bank Group (WBG).

Pacific Islands were part of the wider call for a new international body, under the control of the UN, to be charged with distributing mitigation and adaptation funding, as well as managing the transfer of necessary technology to those most in need. States ravaged by cyclones or rising tides are hardly investor-magnets, they assert, yet they desperately need access to funding and technology to help with urgent matters such as sea walls, water desalination and adapting agriculture.

Under attack over its record on environmental projects and an increase in funding for coal-related projects, during the conference the WBG issued a defence of the carbon market model it had fostered with the Prototype Carbon Fund. The WBG acknowledged some Clean Development Mechanism decisions ‘have had a disproportionate negative impact on Least Developed Countries’ (The World Bank, 2009, p. 2).

We’ve had so many pledges in past sessions, but funds that were pledged were never put into the accounts. (C. Beck, personal interview, 8 December 2009)

The small island states are not the cause of the problem... The cost of Katrina was 100 billion dollars, and now we, the developing countries, are being offered a tenth of that. (Nakayama, 2009)

The LDC is also adamant that its members would be best served by a new funding mechanism. Asked about the WBG's handling of the existing climate fund, lead spokesman for the LDC Bruno Tseliso Sekoli responded that 'We have more trust in the United Nations.' (B. Sekoli, personal interview, 10 December 2009)

### **Towards a South Pacific perspective on climate change?**

Pacific Islands Forum leaders first made explicit note of the threat that climate change poses to economic growth, sustainable development, cultures, governance and security to their region in the 2008 Niue Declaration. The seeds to the push for accountability were planted in this text, which framed climate change as

a long-term international challenge requiring a resolute and concerted international effort, and stressing the need for urgent action by the world's major greenhouse gas emitting countries to set targets and make commitments to significantly reduce their emissions, and to support the most vulnerable countries to adapt to and address the impacts of climate change (PIFS, 2009).

Pacific perspectives on climate change have helped foster wider appreciation of the risk climate poses to traditional cultures. A longstanding refusal by Pacific leaders to consider allowing their populations to automatically morph into stateless 'climate refugees' is rooted in the belief that treating relocation as a necessity serves as a shield for inaction by the industrialised world.

Climate change threatens our way of life, our rich culture and traditions... We're hoping that if things go the way we need to go, there will be no need for relocation from one island to another... There is no need at the moment to move populations from one nation to another. (Saumataua, press conference, 2009)

International commentators such as Naomi Klein, author of *The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, have noted the fears of cultural extinction expressed by

Pacific leaders and incorporated them into a broader understanding of developing world perspectives on climate change.

It's a benign form of genocide, and I'm not even sure it's that benign...  
It's not just about climate refugees, it's about cultures disappearing under the waves. (Klein, press conference, 2009)

Pacific Island states have become emblems of an international movement for 'climate justice,' centered on human rights and anti-poverty discourse. During COP 15, Kumi Naidoo, the new international executive director of Greenpeace and a former anti-apartheid activist in South Africa spoke of a 'climate apartheid,' as did Bishop Desmond Tutu, a term coined to describe the marginalisation of those with little means to protect themselves from the worst ravages of the changing climate. Tokelau was arguably the most marginalised of all in the UN forum, due to its status as a Non-Self Governing Territory. The two Tokelauan delegates attended as part of the New Zealand delegation. Because of the low-lying island's stance on climate change, they were not permitted to attend delegation meetings:

We'd be speaking about completely different issues... We're saying something contradictory to New Zealand policy. (F. Toloa, personal interview, 17 December 2009)

Neither were they able to participate in AOSIS discussions, after a request for Observer Status was turned down.

### **Conflicting agendas**

The fiercest opposition to the agenda pursued by the Pacific Island states came from the region's larger powers, Australia and New Zealand. Tim Groser, who in January became New Zealand's Minister Responsible for International Climate Change Negotiations, was a blunt critic of their approach. Groser condemned what he called 'neomarxist' rhetoric and an 'extremist negotiating culture,' reserving particular criticism for Tuvalu. In an interview with the author, Groser commented on the proposal to limit CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million.

I understand exactly the logic of their position. But right now, it's politically out of the possible. (T. Groser, personal interview, 12 December 2009)

In the future—he suggested around 100 years—Grocer argued it may become feasible to stabilise CO<sub>2</sub> levels once new technology becomes available.

On the second-to-last day of the conference, Tuvaluan Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia told reporters that the Australian delegation and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's office had been pressuring small islands to change their position on the temperature limit and on calls for a legally binding agreement. The Tuvaluan delegation had refused to meet with the Australians but other Pacific leaders had been told that 'they agree to the 2 degree limit and (climate change adaptation) funding will be on the table.' (Ielemia, press conference, 2009)

Ielemia said that he was 'gravely concerned' with the way the COP 15 conference had gone, and that it came down to 'backroom deals by a select few':

We want to exist as a nation. Because we have a fundamental right to exist alongside yourselves. (Ielemia, press conference, 2009)

The Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Immigration of Kiribati, Tessie Lambourne, said that her president and other leaders attended a meeting in the first week of the conference with Australian and British representatives to consider how to move forward on the negotiations:

Our delegation did not get any offer of aid from Australia in return for our agreement to back down... The basic survival of our peoples and our country is the bottom line for us and we are not going to trade this for anything. (T. Lambourne, personal interview, 19 December 2009)

The Australian delegation and the Office of the Australian Prime Minister refused to comment on the alleged pressure on Pacific Island states. New Zealand's Minister for Climate Change Issues, Nick Smith, denied that any pressure had been placed on the smaller delegations by New Zealand. Australia and New Zealand were not the only states averse to the agenda on climate change pursued by the smaller members of the South Pacific. Papua New Guinea was a lukewarm member of the otherwise tight-knitted AOSIS group.

Papua New Guinea is a big-player in climate change negotiations with a history of outspokenness. Unlike other Pacific Islands states, the forestry-rich nation rented an office space in the conference center for COP 15. Their

delegation of 63 dwarfed even that of New Zealand and included international celebrities Vivienne Westwood and Bianca Jagger.

Under the leadership of Kevin Conrad, Special Envoy and Ambassador on Climate Change, the Papua New Guinean delegation pursued objectives often at odds with those of its island neighbours. Conrad is himself a celebrity, famous for chastising the Bush Administration representative at climate change negotiations in Bali to either show leadership or 'get out of the way'. Conrad has been one of the main architects of the proposed forest scheme, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, or REDD. Largely due to the groundwork he has laid, this is one of the areas of climate change negotiations where the most progress is being made. He has also been instrumental in the creation of the WBG's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, which has already mobilised billions in pledges from developed countries, intended to protect the world's rainforests. REDD would establish forestry 'sinks', allowing countries to offset their carbon emissions by buying credits from developing countries to guarantee the protection of trees. Cap-and-trade policies favoured by many in the developed world, including the Australian and New Zealand governments, depend on REDD, carbon credits and similar international trading schemes being a major component of any international agreement on climate change.

Critics in the developing world, especially low-lying islands and African nations, argue that this approach merely protects emitters from having to take concrete measures at home. It also directs climate change 'funds' overwhelmingly to countries rich in forestry or carbon credits, not necessarily those most in need of assistance. *Time* magazine put Conrad at the top of its annual list of 'Heroes of the Environment' for 2008 for his outspokenness on climate change. As *The Australian* reported earlier in 2009, however, the American expat's reputation is a little less glowing within Papua New Guinea, where he is known for a string of failed business deals. The article labels the REDD proposal a 'classic 21st-century scam emerging from the global climate change industry' (Callick, 2009).

That Papua New Guinea's agenda has diverged from what the rest of the Pacific Island states are striving for was evident at Copenhagen. When AOSIS proposed a text to the UN Plenary that reflected its ambitious collective objectives at the end of the first week, PNG broke ranks. Marstella Jack, a private attorney working for the government

delegation of the Federated States of Micronesia, said that members of AOSIS were caught by surprise when Papua New Guinea voted against the text they proposed. The union had submitted the proposition collectively, but PNG only voiced its objections after the text was put before the rest of the UN.

It would have been good if they had raised it in the discussions. There's some internal dynamics going on inside their team. (M. Jack, personal interview, 14 December 2009)

There was a lot of division within the Papua New Guinea delegation, other Pacific delegates confirmed. Conrad was making decisions unilaterally, one member of the PNG delegation said, on condition of anonymity. He sought to represent the delegation on Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, or REDD, single-handedly and with little consultation, the delegate said, while other members were made to focus on non-forestry related negotiations.

Another way in which the emerging REDD regime might adversely affect the South Pacific is its potential impact on forest-dwelling indigenous communities. In a region where mining, forestry and biofuels have often led to the exploitation of local communities, any international agreement on credits for forestry is likely to have consequences in areas with dense forest, notably Fiji, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

The recognition of customary law and practices in any REDD text is crucial in order to protect indigenous rights. As Eric Kwa writes,

local empowerment will be particularly important in forest management for REDD projects and in relocations of communities displaced by rising seas or other climatic impacts. (Kwa, 2009, p. 118)

REDD has drawn criticism from indigenous rights groups such as Survival International. Instances of so-called 'carbon cowboys' signing contracts with forest inhabitants have already been reported in PNG and the Colombian Amazon, while in Indonesia the government is trying to claim ownership of forests and the associated carbon rights. The billions of dollars REDD is on the verge of bringing into circulation are also drawing the attention of organised crime (Goering, 2010).

REDD text being drafted at Copenhagen was criticised by observers



after language on Indigenous rights was weakened midway through the conference. Wording to ensure the safeguarding of these rights had been moved from the operational text to the preamble of the REDD section. The safeguard language was also modified from parties 'shall implement' to the weaker 'should protect'. Papua New Guinea was identified as one of the key players pushing to water down protection for indigenous rights, according to Global Witness, an international non-government organisation that focuses on natural resource exploitation and corruption (Gyuse, 2009).

In countries such as Papua New Guinea, they have a constitution that says they respect Indigenous peoples' rights, especially land rights. But in implementation in their country, Indigenous people are mostly marginalised from forestry sector development. (Indradi & Lopez, 2009)

And, while he may have rebuked the Bush Administration in the past, this time Conrad reserved his harshest criticism for the stance taken by other Pacific nations during COP 15.

There were many small island states that absolutely delayed negotiations. Tuvalu's behaviour was absolutely outrageous, we lost days and days and days for some idea that wasn't even on the table, it wasn't even realistic. (Conrad & Radio New Zealand, 2009)

Papua New Guinea may have been a close ally to its fellow AOSIS members in Bali, but at Copenhagen it pursued its perceived national interests independently, often coming into conflict its small island neighbours.

## **Conclusion**

The text that emerged out of the COP 15 negotiations, the Copenhagen Accord, has been widely condemned by commentators as a failure. Drafted at the last hour of the conference by a US-led group of large nations, the document was noted and not tabled by the UNFCCC. Pacific Island delegate members were unable to attend the final debates on the Copenhagen Accord, which were attended by representatives from 28 countries. They were represented by Grenada, the AOSIS chair, who chose to back the agreement on behalf of the alliance. Agreement to provide some 'fast track funding' for the poorest and most vulnerable countries was reached, although

whether this will be contributed by governments or from the private sector remains unclear.

A US\$100 billion 'Green Fund' proposed by the International Monetary Fund in January seems to be an attempt to appease demands without accepting the concept of a climate debt. Contrary to what developing nations are requesting, however, the suggested fund is outside of the UN framework and, according to comments made by IMF managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn, any government contributions would be voluntary.

Despite a spirited and tireless performance by Pacific Island delegates throughout the COP 15 negotiations, wider geopolitics ultimately neutered the outcome. While the underlying cause is undoubtedly linked to uncertainty over US domestic legislation, radically conflicting objectives envisioned by developing and developed governments meant common ground was scarce. The South Pacific is a microcosm of conflicting perspectives on the climate change, with calls for justice and emission cuts dismissed as unrealistic and even extremist by the region's larger economies.

The Copenhagen Accord did not include targets on GHG. Emissions targets that governments submitted to the UNFCCC under the accord in January 2010 will allow temperatures to rise as high as 3 degrees Celsius according to at least one estimate (Ecofys, 2010). If maintained in upcoming negotiations, this is potentially the ultimate rejection of the Pacific Island states' assertion of the right to survival.

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*Yasmine Ryan is an independent journalist from New Zealand who is currently based in Paris. She writes weekly on climate change for takepart.com and has also written for The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, the Listener, Scoop and Spasifik. Her complete profile is available at [yasmine.co.nz](http://yasmine.co.nz).  
[yazlydia@gmail.com](mailto:yazlydia@gmail.com)*